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ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of sexism in our society is reflected in language structure and usage. In pronominal usage, masculine singular forms are assumed to include the feminine, although, when referring to female sex-role-typed occupations, "she" is used. In this research, the effect of the instructor's use of "she," as the generic singular, on student language use and student attitude was investigated. The rationale was that pronoun reversal may expose to the hearer the sex bias in the language, leading to a perception of the need for change in the language. Results indicated a change in the use of pronouns, with more specific use of "he," a reduction of the use of "he" as the generic singular, and the use of "she" as a generic. Most students felt a need for an inclusive pronoun in the language. Student response to questionnaires indicated an awareness both of sexism in our society and of the role of language in maintaining sexism. Change in use of pronouns was not considered difficult by the males in the group. (Author/JM)

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Changes in Pronominal Usage

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CS 203 353

Changes in Pronominal Usage Among College Students as a Function of Instructor Use of She as the Generic-Singular Pronoun

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ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of sexism in our society is reflected in both the structure of language and in its usage. The prevalent use of masculine forms as generics is one example of sexism. In pronominal usage, masculine singular forms are assumed to include the feminine, although when referring to female sex-role typed occupations, "she" is used. Use of the masculine singular form as a generic has been questioned by many feminists. In this research, effect of instructor use of "she" as the generic singular on student language use and student attitude was investigated. The rationale for this choice was that pronoun reversal may expose to the hearer the sex bias in the language, leading to a perception of the need for change in the language.

Results indicated a change in use of pronouns, as compared with a control group, with more specific use of "he", a reduction of use of "he" as the generic singular, and use of "she" as a generic. Most felt a need for an inclusive pronoun in the language. Student response to questionnaires indicated an awareness of sexism in our society, and an awareness of the role of language in maintaining sexism. Change in use of pronouns was not considered difficult by the males in the group. (Language change, sex roles and language, pronouns)

INTRODUCTION

Sexism in language is being widely documented (e.g. Thorne and Henley 1973; Lakoff 1973; Blaubergs 1974; Bodine 1975). Some writers feel that sex is probably the primary organizing variable in thinking about other human beings (Thorne and Henley 1973:6).

In pronominal usage, the masculine singular form has been presumed to refer to both female and male. However, the pattern of using "she" when referring to female sex-role typed occupations suggests that in fact females are often ignored in the sex-indefinite "he". This is confirmed by Graham (1973) who found that of 940 uses of the word "he" in children's textbooks, 97% referred to male human beings, male animals, or male linked occupations; only 3% referred to sex-unspecified persons. Grammar books prescribe use of sex-indefinite "he". In a survey of 33 school grammars, Bodine (1973) found that 28 of the books condemned use of both "he or she" and singular "they", the former because it is "clumsy" and the latter because it is "inaccurate". Male speech is taken as the norm.

Use of the masculine singular form as a generic has been criticized both on the grounds of ambiguity and because of its exclusion of women. The ambiguity argument, that use of "he" as sex-indefinite is an obstacle to clear communication, dates back to 1884 (Martyna 1976). The argument that sex indefinite "he" is sexist is of recent origin. The feminist argument is that sexist language not only reflects but helps to maintain sexism. Language change is therefore seen as an essential part of the attempt to reduce sexism in our society.

Proposals for change have often met with ridicule, as noted by Blaubergs (1975) and Martyna (1976), among others. Frequently the issue is seen as trivial. However the strength of the opposition to proposed language change suggests that something non-trivial is involved. Bodine (1975) cites a modern

text book writer who tells children not to use "he or she" which is "awkward" but instead to follow the convention that "grammatically men are more important than women" (p. 138).

With Bodine (1975), the writer feels that personal reference, including personal pronouns, is one of the most socially significant aspects of language. Acknowledgment of one's own existence is a basic kind of affirmation. Females are "linguistically invisible" when the male terms "man" or "he" are used (cf. Bate 1975). Females are both "he" and "not he", "man" and "not man" at the same time. Many feel there should be visibility for all in the language. Language change is already occurring as a consequence of the feminist movement. Change in current pronominal usage, which excludes women, appears to be essential.

Beyond the argument that pronominal usage should be changed, the question is whether it can be changed. Many, including Lakoff (1973), feel that an attempt to change pronominal usage will be futile since pronouns are so thoroughly embedded in language and are relatively unavailable to conscious analysis.

The purpose of this study was to examine pronominal usage in student behavior as a consequence of instructor use of "she" as the generic singular form. The rationale for this choice was that pronoun reversal may expose to the hearer the sex bias in the language, leading to a perception of the need for change in the language. A basic assumption of the research is that language change and social change are not different processes.

DATA COLLECTION

In this research, effect of instructor use of "she" as the generic singular on student pronominal use and student attitude was investigated. Two undergraduate classes in child psychology, taught by the investigator, were used as subjects (N=74). At the beginning of the term (Spring, 1975), students were given the following written statement describing what instructor usage would be:

On the use of the "generic she"

> Our language uses male pronouns: he, him, and his. It is often said that these pronouns are generic, with "he" referring to and including both he and she, "him" referring to and including him and her and "his" referring to and including both his and hers.
>
> In this class I will be using the "generic she". This is not meant to hurt you; neither does it necessarily reflect my own preferences for the ultimate shape of the language. It is intended as a learning experience and I would like you to reflect on the insights you gain from use of the "generic she". If you get angry, why? If it makes you feel good, why? What issues does it sharpen? What issues does it blur?
>
> And, most important for this particular class, how do the insights you gain from the use of the "generic she" apply to the data, theories, methodology and ideas in psychology?

No requirements or suggestions for student usage were made. Analysis of pronominal usage in the written work of students and questionnaires to obtain student reaction to instructor usage and student views on language usage were the principal measures used.

The written work examined was the student's reaction to essays on child development. Completion of this work is a regular requirement of the course and was submitted at the end of the semester. These were compared to a sample of the writings of the previous year's classes (in the fall of 1974 (N=20), also taught by the investigator, but in which "generic she" was not used. The writings for both years were on the same topics.

Questionnaire I, "On the use of the 'generic she' " was used midway through the semester. This questionnaire repeated the instructor's statement "On the use of the 'generic she' " issued at the beginning of the semester and asked the following questions: 1. Do you feel I have fairly consistently followed the above practice?; 2. What personal, feeling reactions have you had to the use of the "generic she?" (Please be as honest as possible); 3. What observations, insights, or ideas about language, sexism, or psychology have struck you in the course of this exercise?; and 4. Some students have used the "generic she" in their writings. If you were one of these, why did you choose to do so, and what effects has it had on you?

Questionnaire II, "More on the use of the 'generic she' " was distributed at the end of the semester. This questionnaire asked males whether they felt excluded by use of the "generic she" and if they felt females felt excluded by use of the generic "he". Females were asked whether they felt "included in" by use of "generic she" and if they thought the males felt excluded by this use. The respondents were also asked whether they felt an additional pronoun which includes both "he" and "she" was necessary in the language, with "he" used to specifically refer to males and "she" used specifically to refer to females. For those who used "generic she" in their writing, an inquiry about the amount of difficulty involved in the new practice was made.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of written work. Of the 74 students in the two child psychology classes which were studied, the written work of 67 (90%), all but 7, was examined for pronominal usage. Two raters, one female and one male, read all of the writing and coded the generic or specific use of the personal pronouns "she", "her", "hers", "herself", "he", "him", "his", and "himself", as well as any combination of these (e.g. he/she). Rater reliability ranged from 93% to 100%.

For the experimental group there was significantly more use of "she" as the generic ($p < .001, \chi^2$ test for two independent samples), as compared to the control group. The pronoun "he" was also used more specifically and less often generically by the experimental group ($p < .05, \chi^2$ test for two independent samples). There was no significant difference between females and males in the experimental group in their use of "she" or "he". Six female and three male students in the sample used neither generic "he" or "generic she". Table 1 summarizes the frequency and percentage of generic and specific usage for the experimental and control group.

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Place table 1 about here.

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Questionnaire I. Return rate of questionnaire I, which was not a course requirement, was 76%. 83% of the females and 63% of the males returned the questionnaire. In response to question 1, answered by 54 students, 96% felt I had consistently followed the stated practice. Questions 2, 3, 4 were rated for awareness of sexism. Awareness of sexism was broadly defined, for the purposes of the rating, as a recognition of differences in the social, political and economic positions of women and men in our society. Results are summarized in Table 2.

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Place table 2 about here.

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These results indicate that the majority of both female and male students were aware of sexism. There were no significant differences between females and males on awareness of sexism.

Questionnaire II. 51 students (69%) returned the second questionnaire (35 females and 16 males). Results are summarized in Table 3.

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Place table 3 about here.

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Figures indicate that the majority of men (87%) did not feel excluded by the usage of "generic she" and felt that women did not feel excluded by use of "he"; (37%) were uncertain about whether they felt excluded. Females felt included by use of "she" (74%) and either felt that the males felt excluded (34%) or were uncertain about whether they felt excluded (37%). Both females (86%) and males (69%) felt an additional inclusive pronoun was needed. Of

those who used "generic she" in their writing, most of the males (69%) felt it was not difficult; most of the women (86%) felt it was difficult.

DISCUSSION

Clearly it is possible to use alternative forms for the generic "he", and students are willing or able to do so. In the experimental groups significantly more use was made of the "generic she" and "he" was used more frequently with specific reference. The lack of a significant difference between women and men in their use of pronouns in their writing indicate that both are equally capable of using new forms. This study provides support for Bodine (1975:143) who states that "..... any aspect of the language code or language usage is susceptible to conscious change provided that the necessary motivation and proper field for implementation exists ....." Rapid changes in pronominal usage following the French revolution indicate that language reform is not necessarily a slow process (Robiquet (1938)[2].

Although there were no directions to use "generic she" some students perceived instructor usage as a classroom mandate. But whether by choice or perceived demand, it is clear that pronominal usage is accessible to change. Reasons for choosing to use or not use "generic she" ranged from "I did it to expand my thinking" (M) to "It would be difficult for me to use it because of what had been ingrained in me previously" (M). Some students used both pronouns (he/she); some students used "one", the singular "they", or rearranged their sentences to reduce the need for pronouns. Use of "the child" was frequent. Some students used no generic pronouns at all.

Comments on difficulty of using the "generic she" illustrate some of the reactions of the students:

> "I thought it would be hard at first to write she instead of he...but I didn't find it all that difficult."(F)

2. Nancy Henley kindly brought this to my attention.

> "At first I thought I'd never be able to change he to she but now I find that there was really no drastic change. I use she just as freely as I use he." (F)
>
> "The most important thing to me was that it wasn't hard to change at all. And if just changing a couple of words wasn't hard, then maybe more social changes lie ahead with respect to male and female socialization." (F)
>
> "It was not difficult once I was in the habit of doing it. I used it to allow me to feel how women feel about using the 'generic he', excluded." (M)

The majority of the experimental group was aware of sexism as an issue in society. One female student remarked:

> "Before I came to this class I never really thought about the male pronouns he, his and him, very much, they didn't bother me. I just took for granted that this was the way it was supposed to be. But after the change to the "generic she" it made me think more and wonder why everything has been so male oriented."

There was no significant difference between females and males in awareness of sexism.

The extent that the use of "generic she" was responsible for the level of awareness of sexism is impossible to estimate since its use cannot be disentangled from the context of the course as a whole. That the "generic she" exercise in role reversal exerted an impact is apparent not only from the changes in pronominal usage but also from the reaction of the students. One male student's reaction was:

> "At first, I thought "why bother?" What difference can grammar possibly make? I was slightly offended and the teacher's reputation as a "woman's libber" (whatever that is) didn't help.... I have come to believe that language is the single most important reflection of the nature of a culture. It reflects it's prejudices, it's attitudes, it's lifestyle, and it's tempo. Sexism is a dirty word. It is a reflection of a culture which is parasitic, confused, and messed-up. The psychology of the "generic she" is that it shows the male the commonplace, seemingly small ('til the tables turn) prejudices against the female. If, as a male, one can truly identify with the grammatical prejudice of a three-hour a week "generic she", then he (this, I must note, is not a "generic he") gets a better understanding of what the female must be undergoing with the 168-hour a week "generic he"."

A common response by males in answer to the question "Do you think women feel excluded when the "generic he" is used?" was that women are "used to it". Women, on the other hand, were considerably more concerned about men feeling excluded by the "generic she". Some responses indicated that women perceived men as feeling excluded "at first". Other women felt that if men did feel excluded, "they shouldn't have". Although there was no significant differences between females and males in pronominal usage, women reported a higher level of difficulty in using "generic she" than men did. Most women reported that it was difficult at first, but then it became easy. Many men appeared to be reluctant to admit difficulty (e.g., "using it wasn't difficult but remembering to was"). Perhaps for the women the initial effort to use another form is the most difficult obstacle, whereas for men the difficulties of change will extend for a longer time period. Some responses of a female and male student which illustrate this possibility are the following:

> F: "Once I started using the 'she' I found it hard to stop. I liked using the 'generic she' -- it gave me a sense of equality -- power even."
>
> M: "I wouldn't say it was difficult but it took some thought to keep things straight."

The response of most women to the use of "generic she" was that it was positive and self-enhancing as the following comments from women illustrate:

> "I felt surprisingly proud when I used it"
>
> ".....it made me as a female feel more important....."
>
> "I liked the feeling of superiority it gave me"
>
> "I have used it in some writings and it really gives me (almost) a feeling of freedom." (note: "almost" was inserted in afterward, above the line).

Others felt the practice strange, and one female reported that "I felt exposed"; another said that she ".....felt unfairly included". The investigation of linguistic exclusion on female self-esteem is an important area for investigation.

The majority of female and male students felt an additional pronoun which includes both "he" and "she" is desirable. As one female student expressed it: "It only makes common sense, after all women are not "he" and men are not "she". Another female student said: "Now that I've heard "she" used for both for awhile I can see a definite need and right for a distinction. I don't like to hear "she" when one means "he and she", nor do I like "he" for "she and he". I say -- use "he" for "he" and "she" for "she" or be more distinctive in your choice of words -- like people, etc."

Several students noted that use of "generic she" made them envision females when it was used:

> "It made me think of a female instead of a male figure when I used her, hers, and she." (F)
>
> "I could picture a female in roles so often pictured as strictly male." (F)
>
> "Whenever I used the pronoun 'she' it made me think I was referring to a woman only." (M)

These responses indicate that the imagery evoked by pronouns is probably sex specific, as imagery of "generic man" is male (Schneider and Hacker 1973). The opportunity for role reversal allowed some students to experience life from the female point of view. One male reported:

> "I felt kind of funny when I read the responses on my book report and they referred to me as "she". I am sure this is the way women feel most of the time when they read "he", (note: These responses on the book report were written by other members of the class)."

Many students noted the difficulty of introducing a new pronoun and felt that " (such a pronoun) should have been included in the language at its onset." Some suggested that the singular "they" is a good possibility, but rejected "it" because it doesn't have a human connotation. None mentioned the new constructions being suggested for pronominal use in the language, perhaps because they were unaware of their existence. One student

suggested that, rather than a new pronoun, "usage of generic he's and she's would probably go more unnoticed and satisfy everyone."

Although most students felt a "neutral", inclusive pronoun was necessary, none in fact either used one or suggested one. It seems likely that, rather than adopting a new pronoun, individuals will, as did the students in this experiment, use the personal pronouns specifically, use the singular 'they' for a generic form, and use various re-routings of speech around sexist constructions. As Martyna (1976) points out, although new pronominal forms have been suggested, they have not often been used.

As Bodine also points out, the feminist attack on the sex-indefinite "he" will have an effect and that the changes will warrant study:

> "As English pronominal usage is increasingly affected by (the feminist movement), it will afford an ideal opportunity to study differences in language change among those who make a conscious decision and deliberate effort to change, among those who are aware that the change is taking place but have no particular interest in the issue, among those who are oblivious to change, and among those who are consciously resisting the change" (Bodine 1975:144)

IMPLICATIONS

The research reported indicates that it is possible to alter pronominal usage. Use of "generic she" created a situation in which the students could become aware of sexism in language and encouraged some of them to try alternative forms. Increased attention to personal pronouns transformed what was an automatic process into one that is less so.

Language change is being deliberately sought. The present study indicates that rate of change will probably depend on developing awareness of the need for and significance of the change. Awareness of forms of social behavior which need to be changed is a first step toward needed revision of sexist social forms.

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of generic and specific usage of "she" and "he" for the experimental group (N=74) and control group (N=20)[1].

	She		He	
	f	% of total	f	% of total
Generic Use				
Control	7	.01	79	.13
Experimental	124	.08	114	.07
Specific Use				
Control	228	.37	270	.43
Experimental	779	.47	603	.37
Not Categorized				
Control	9	.01	4	.01
Experimental	6	.004	10	.01
Non Sexist (he/she)				
Control	25	.04		
Experimental	9	.005		

Total number of pronouns rated for control group: 622

Total number of pronouns rated for experimental group: 1645

1. The high initial use of "she" non-generically reflects the contents of some of the material read (Candida Peterson, A Child Grows Up) in which a father writes about his daughter. This was constant for both groups.

Table 2

Questionnaire I

On the use of the "generic she": awareness of sexism

	Females		Males	
	n	%	n	%
Not aware	5	.11	3	.11
Aware	34	.72	14	.52
Did not return questionnaire	8	.17	10	.37
Total n	47	1.00	27	1.00

Table 3

Questionnaire II

More on the use of the "generic she"

	Yes		No		?		Other	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Females (N=35)								
felt included	26	.74	2	.06	1	.03	6	.17
think men felt excluded	12	.34	4	.11	13	.37	4	.12
need for additional pronoun	30	.86	1	.03	3	.08		
difficult to use she (n reporting using she: 29)	15	.52	11	.38	3	.10		
Males (N=16)								
felt excluded	2	.13	14	.87				
women feel excluded with "generic he"	3	.19	6	.37	7	.44		
need for additional pronoun	11	.69	3	.19	1	.06	1	.06
difficult to use she (n reporting using she: 9)	0	.00	8	.89	1	.11		

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